

What a Resume Is (and Isn't)

When a potential employer first looks at you, 99 times out of 100 he or she is looking at a piece of paper known as a *resume*. Initially, more job opportunities are lost because of a poor resume than any other single factor.

With so much riding on that word picture, it's amazing how many misconceptions there are about the resume. It is *not* a biography of your life. It is *not* a catalog of skills. It is *not* a job application.

It should be a well-structured, easy-to-read presentation of your own capabilities and accomplishments, short and to the point. Its purpose is likewise clear-cut: to intrigue a prospective employer to the point where he or she invites you for an interview. That's it—no mystery. Strange, then, that so many mistakes have been made, so many career moves aborted all because people don't know how to put together this simple but crucial document.

With so much riding on it, you'd better know how the game is played. Resume formats, what to include, what to leave out, where to put a key paragraph, how the document should look, even the paper it's printed on all count. The result should be one tightly written, perfectly clear portrait of you and your related work accomplishments, education, and skills—no more, and certainly no less.

CONSIDER THE PLIGHT OF THE HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER

For every position, no matter how elaborate the screening process, there are two basic piles: "consider again" and "reject." Running the gamut from 1-page notes to 12-page personal presentations, 99 percent of all so-called resumes wind up as rejects.

To see how the system works, consider one typically harassed professional: Gary Burdens. Burdens is a human resources manager at the Midwest headquarters for the #2 maker of pharmaceutical products. The corporation typically receives 40,000 to 50,000 resumes annually. Hires usually average only 200 to 300 per year. For everyone hired an average of two to three applicants are interviewed. That means of all the thousands of resumes pouring into headquarters, only from 400 to 900 will ever result in an interview—no more than one or two out of every 100 resumes in the stack!

When does Burdens read the 20,000 resumes reviewed by the average employment manager? Not during the day—he has meetings to attend, ads to place, and, of course, interviews with the few whose resumes cleared the first hurdle.

So he lugs an average of 100 resumes home nightly. By the time dinner is over and the kids are tucked in, he can count on maybe an hour or two of reading. How does he spot the fraction of an ounce of gold within the tons of slag in the resume pile?

He doesn't read—he scans. He checks to see whether the individual has the qualifications and career interests that mesh with current job orders. Poorly prepared resumes are the first to be discarded.

One of the first things he looks for are *results*. Most people list job assignments. They know what they're paid to do. Few actually specify the results they produced. Seeing quantifiable results immediately alerts Burdens that he may have found a real live candidate.

POOR EXAMPLE

Sold biotechnical products in a territory from Denver, CO, to San Francisco, CA.

GOOD EXAMPLE

Increased sales of gastrointestinal medication "Prevasic" in my territory by 20% over a two-year span.

Your resume with specific achievements helps you stand out, giving interviewers like Burdens a reason to place you in the active candidate pile.

YOUR RESUME MUST SHOW YOUR ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

A good resume does more than just describe skills and achievements. By the way it's written, it helps Burdens form a picture of you. A rambling resume points out an individual who can't clarify his or her own thought processes. So it gets dumped.

On the other hand, if your resume is brief, clearly written, and interesting, it makes you stand out. Burdens has a positive picture of a person who can work well within his firm. He's interested, because you've come alive through your word picture.

The next question is, "If I'm not a good writer, should I do my own resume?" Having read thousands of resumes, I cast my own vote for the self-written version. Any good human resources person can spot the prefab variety from a resume shop, because it sounds canned and tinny. You don't need to be brilliant to create a winning resume—just be organized. I've outlined all the right steps in the upcoming pages. Follow along and you won't go wrong.

One of the first things I recommend is that you lead off with a strong summary of your background—a mini "Who I Am."

POOR EXAMPLE

Demonstrated ability to understand a company's long-term strategic visions and goals, complex business rules, and inherent constraints, in order to design, develop, document, implement, and maintain a flexible, comprehensive, cost-effective database structure and processes application software for new or major revisions to existing products or processes.

What *is* this woman saying? By the time a weary reader gets to the end of this sentence, all comprehension is lost.

WORSE YET

This letter explains my experience, which can be verified with the enclosed references. I believe that food service is truly an art—much like a dancer executes the perfect turn, an actor commands the stage, or a painter applies his brush to canvas.

You could weep from the sensitivity. Seeing this handwritten, so-called resume on pink paper decorated with stars and moons, a personnel type would be likely to wince and toss.

GOOD EXAMPLE

Nine successful years with Hyatt Hotels Corporation, Eastern Region. Promoted from various management positions to an Executive Committee Member. Supervised 25 employees and 4 managers while overseeing the operations of Front Office, Reservations, Guest Services, and Telecommunications. Manager of the Year—Hyatt Arlington—1999.

Clean; concise; specific; this summary leaves no questions about the capabilities and expertise of the candidate.

YOUR RESUME IS A PERSONAL PRESENTATION OF HOW YOU VIEW YOURSELF

When you go to your closet in the morning, you don't throw on an old sweatsuit if you're going to a business meeting simply because it happens to be the first thing you find on the rack. Likewise, your resume can't be a hodgepodge of whatever happens to fall into your mind the moment you're hitting the computer, word processor, or typewriter. The key is editing.

In preparation for writing this book, I've reviewed hundreds of resumes. A foreign-born candidate for an executive housekeeping position with a major hotel chain sent in a 23-page "Resume Update USA" that included everything from background, nationality, marital status, education, and further education to a dozen "To whom it may concern" letters and half a dozen photocopied certificates. Nobody ever said the hunt for jobs was conducted on a level playing field. This earnest candidate did not learn the all-important lesson of correct presentation for the American marketplace.

Very simply, what you leave out can be as important as what you put into your resume. An effective resume carefully re-creates your true, professional beauty. It should *not* be an unretouched photo—warts and all!

YOUR RESUME IS THE FIRST WORK PRODUCT YOU SHOW A PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER

A good resume does more than simply describe where you've been and what you've done. By the way it's written, it actually shows how well you think and communicate. Consider it like the first assignment you show to your employer and treat it with appropriate significance.

Two pieces of communication came into a midsize legal firm in Northern California. The first was a stand-alone letter, the second a resume with cover letter.

POOR LETTER EXAMPLE

Does your company need additional clerical support? My name is Stephanie Carples and I would like to make myself available to do any letter or documentation typing you may need. I have 15 years experience as a secretary with knowledge of both medical and legal terminology.

This letter was printed using a very light script font, so it was difficult to read. There was no address, just a phone number in the middle of the page. The paper was drugstore standard, and the letter had no semblance of a professional look. Yet this person asked for a position conveying a legal firm's appearance to the outside world!

GOOD RESUME EXAMPLE

Qualifications

More than seven years of experience providing clerical and administrative support, including:

- Scheduling appointments, interpreting policies and procedures, answering heavy phones, and dealing extensively with the public.
- Proficient in the use of IBM PC, WordPerfect, Symphony, Professional File, and general office equipment such as: fax, copier, LaserJet printer.

This woman's resume was easy to read and review. She had excellent qualifications, and her presentation did her justice. Yes, she got the assignment!

YOUR RESUME HELPS YOU FOCUS ON A POSITION, NOT JUST SETTLE FOR A JOB

At the same time you're creating a resume, hopefully to encourage companies to recognize your employment potential, you should also be selecting the kinds of positions you're willing to accept. You can create target resumes dedicated to your interest in a single industry or type of position. And you needn't limit yourself to just one. Considered as a marketing tool with a variety of formats, your resume has infinite possibilities, especially when you create more than one. Though no resume alone will win the job for you, without a good one you can't even proceed to the next level.

Planning Your Resume

Before you begin making over your resume or creating one for the first time, consider what your previous job hire experience has been.

FIRST MAKE SURE THE FAULT LIES WITHIN YOUR RESUME

- **Resume getting few or no responses.** Don't condemn your resume right away. It's possible you just don't *fit* into the position you're seeking. You may need further education, or retraining. On the other hand, maybe the fault lies squarely with your resume. In that case, you're in the right place!
- **Resume getting responses but no interviews.** Again, the problem may be something other than your resume. If you've gotten a nibble from an interviewer from a telephone chat but it leads to no first interview, the problem could be in your telephone technique. Or maybe the human resources representative sees through you and instinctively feels that you're not what you portrayed in your resume. That's all the more reason to make your resume reflect the *real* you—truthful and in command of your destiny.
- **Resume getting first interviews, but falling down in the clinches.** Once more, you may simply not fit in. If you've oversold or undersold yourself on paper, it comes through loud and clear during the initial interview. Review it for false advertising; check out your interview skills—and your deodorant.
- **“Always a bridesmaid, never a bride.”** If your resume gets you in the door more than once, it's time to review your resume with a fine-tooth comb. When you're that close, there are usually very small differences that result in the offer being extended. If you can increase your chances by even 1 percent, it can make the crucial difference. A resume makeover can help by guiding the interviewer

through your accomplishments and emphasizing them in comparison to other candidates’.

IF YOUR CURRENT RESUME *ISN'T* WORKING, WHY NOT?

Sins of commission . . . sins of omission—there are so many things that can lead to the reject pile. Here are the 10 most common:

1. **Too long.** This is probably the most frequent error. You don’t have to put everything down—it counts against you. With few exceptions, your resume is far more likely to attract favorable notice when you limit its content to *one* well-drafted page.
2. **Disorganized.** With no recognizably consistent format, it’s too hard to find the important information.
3. **Overly wordy.** Are your sentences too long? Paragraphs too dense? Are you using three words when one precise one will do?
4. **Lacks essential results or accomplishments.** In Chapter 1, I spoke about quantifiable achievements. Without them, you’re missing strong selling points. You “saved current employer *x* dollars with cost-cutting measures in office supply purchases.” You “founded a specialty photographic laboratory and sold it just three years later for a substantial profit.” You get the picture.
5. **Too bare-bones.** Job seekers who feel that “name, rank, and serial number” or employer, job title, and dates of employment constitute a full-blown resume are wrong. And they never get called.
6. **Irrelevant information.** You can do more harm than good with data like age, height, weight, hobbies, even certain *telling* information about schools or organizations. Look at it this way: You’re selling the professional aspect of your life . . . period. Employers don’t want to know your golf handicap, and they have no right to other personal information. The rules have changed.
7. **Unprofessional appearance.** The would-be secretary for the law office in Chapter 1 committed this sin. Poor typing, poor printing—even with the best qualifications, you can’t get past a sloppy presentation.
8. **Misspellings, poor grammar, and other gaffes.** I’ve met many personnel people who immediately consign a resume to the reject stack just because of misspelled words. It may not be fair, but it’s real life. You should spell check the finished resume, read it twice, and then have an individual whose spelling and grammar you respect proof it. That disinterested eye usually catches hidden errors.
9. **The glitz effect.** Fancy binders are a waste of money and don’t fit in manila files. Photographs and unusual paper colors are deterrents rather than benefits. If in doubt, leave it out. Stick to the proven formats in this book.

10. **Misdirected to incorrect individuals.** Sometimes it's not the human resources department to whom you should be sending. It might be the department head.

FEEL GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF AND WRITE A GREAT RESUME

If you're discouraged when you begin writing your resume, the results will show through. It may be difficult to psych yourself up when you're feeling lousy about the promotion you didn't get, or the pink slip you just received. With some time for reflection, though, you can do it. The trick's in knowing your own value-added factors—what you, uniquely, can offer an organization. Here are some examples:

- Innovative techniques you've applied to solve key operating problems.
- Fresh, original ideas to improve the status quo.
- Proven ability to motivate others—the leadership factor.
- Knowing how to pare down expenses—really important in these lean times.
- Profit improvement methods—another surefire plus.

Employment managers are looking for the value-added factor. If you can demonstrate that you have it, they'll want to see you because most managers believe that such accomplishments predict future success. And they *need* you to be successful after hire to validate their own positions!

In the next chapter, as you review your background, you'll have a format for discovering and expanding on your own personal value-added factors.

TECHNIQUES TO MAKE YOU BEST ON PAPER, BEST IN PERSON

Looking at that blank piece of paper or computer screen can be very intimidating. One of the most important tricks to get past it is to pretend you're an interviewer and ask yourself the following series of questions:

1. **How do you stand out from the mediocre worker?** If you're truly committed to your career, you see yourself as above the competition. Exploit the positive differences you see.
2. **What specifically did you do in a given activity to prove your value?** A public relations professional wrote that she "planned and executed special events for airline accounts which earned an award from the Public Relations Society of America." An English teacher

who went abroad to teach Japanese students indicated that “In working with 32 public schools in Nagasaki, Japan, I wrote and delivered one motivational speech a week.” It is these kinds of specifics that enable employment managers to see you in the flesh, even when all they’re looking at is a piece of paper.

3. **Once you start outlining a series of bare facts, ask yourself “so what?”** “What difference will this make to the person reading my resume?” “Was my achievement bigger or better than anyone else’s?” “How did my role in persuading the board of directors to adopt a five-year management plan following a series of crises subsequently improve the commercial brokerage I worked for?” On the other hand, if you follow this train of thought for a given task and it leads to no particular advantage for you, leave it off the resume. Remember—you should plan to file no more than a single page.
4. **Envision yourself in a series of different scenarios.**
 - a. Imagine that a good friend of yours works for an employer you’d love to be associated with. Imagine the two of them talking about you. What positive characteristics would your friend use to describe your benefits to the potential employer?
 - b. It’s your first day on the job, and you love it. What is it you love about this new position, and why do your new business associates appreciate you?
 - c. Imagine yourself to be a visiting efficiency expert. You have to tell your employer what people can do to make themselves better at their jobs. Be very specific as it relates to positions you’ve held. Once you’ve described what helped to make you very good at your job, it’s great resume material!

Once your resume’s complete, you can use these same methods to improve your in-person skills. Use them to enhance your ability to discuss your aptitudes and achievements when you’re across the desk from the interviewer.

HOW TO MAKE WRITING YOUR RESUME AS SIMPLE AS FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Writing your resume is a series of decisions about what to tell of your related work experiences. Next chapter, you can let your thought processes flow freely as you jot down details in several categories. Through this broad information gathering you’ll have the raw material you need to graft the vital elements into your chosen resume format.